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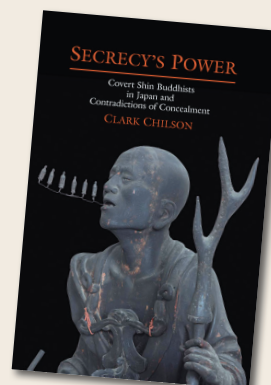
BOOK REVIEW

Secrecy's Power: Covert Shin Buddhists in Japan and Contradictions of Concealment

By Clark Chilson

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Reviewed by Kate Wildman NAKAI



In *Secrecy's Power* Clark Chilson examines several strands of covert Shin Buddhism, most of which mainstream “overt” Jōdo Shinshū, or the True Pure Land School, has traditionally held to be heretical. He takes up some of the Tokugawa and Meiji antecedents of such groups, but devotes most of the book to a consideration of the immediate background and practices of two present-day varieties of covert Shin. The fieldwork he has been able to do among them enriches this approach.

As the book's title indicates, Chilson is particularly interested in forms of concealment and their consequences. He accordingly divides the cases he considers into three types. The first covers instances where the adoption of strategies of secrecy was seen itself as problematic and led to criticism and persecution. Among these were several incidents in Kyoto, Edo, and the Tōhoku area in the mid-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries involving Shin-related practices that were held to be aberrant. Chilson also puts in this category a present-day Tōhoku group known as Gonaihō that remains highly secretive and largely inaccessible to researchers.

The second type centers on instances where overt Shin was subject to persecution and groups that may not originally have been covert went underground to protect themselves. Shin groups in Satsuma domain, which proscribed Shin itself, offer the prime example. Chilson notes that over time protective strategies of secrecy may transform the original tradition as it absorbs different observances meant initially to camouflage its own practices. To examine this phenomenon, he takes up a present-day Kyushu group with which he has been able to engage to some extent. Known today as Kirishimakō, this group has developed an association with the Kirishima Shrine, and its members sometimes describe themselves as practitioners of Kirishima Shinto rather than Shin Buddhism, although they retain elements clearly deriving from Shin traditions.

The third type subsumes groups that continue to remain covert today, even when social and political conditions that may have originally necessitated secrecy no longer are a factor. Chilson's major example is the group with which he has had the most extensive contact, a number of confraternities based in Kyoto and Gifu known as Urahōmon. Although, like Kirishimakō, these confraternities have formed ties with an outside religious organization, in this case a Tendai-affiliated Kyoto temple known as Kūyadō, the degree of assimilation is

less than with Kirishimakō. Exploring the implications of secrecy for Urahōmon, Chilson concludes that remaining covert is in part a matter of identity but also has to do with the role of the confraternity leader, the *zenchishiki*, the figure above all responsible for guarding and transmitting the group's secret traditions.

Chilson's conclusions regarding the second and third types are plausible and fruitful. In particular, the situation of covert Shin practitioners in southern Kyushu and the process of assimilation that he describes invite comparison with the circumstances of hidden Christian groups in other regions of Kyushu. His argument concerning the first type, where he sees the pursuit of secrecy as the source of persecution, seems to me, however, to conflate separate issues. In the instances Chilson describes, it often was overt Shin temples and leaders who brought the existence of covert groups to the attention of government authorities, who then took action against those groups. This does not mean, though, that the Shin leaders and government authorities saw the situation from identical perspectives. For overt Shin leaders, claims of secret knowledge and the performance of secret rituals that bore on fundamental Shin tenets may indeed have been the key issue. For government authorities, on the other hand, the major problem more likely was the status of those promoting the covert practices.

The Tokugawa shogunate banned Christianity and certain Buddhist groups such as the Nichiren offshoot Fujū Fuse as socially and politically pernicious (Satsuma prohibited Shin on the same grounds). Otherwise, it expected recognized religious groups to police themselves through hierarchically organized mechanisms for licensing temples and clergy. Shogunal and domainal authorities in fact tolerated a wide variety of lay confraternities, but they saw proselytization and doctrinal interpretations as being the prerogatives of licensed clergy and not something to be arrogated by lay practitioners. Government animus against the groups in Chilson's first category would seem to have been directed more at the groups' transgression of this principle than the claims to secret knowledge condemned by Shin leaders.

Although Chilson's primary focus is the reason for covert Shin groups to adopt strategies of concealment and those strategies' consequences, running through his discussion are other issues that might profitably be pursued further. A common element shared by most of the groups he takes up is a secret rite meant to ensure an act of true faith that will in turn guarantee not only rebirth in Amida's paradise but rebirth in this life. Such practices resonate with elements found quite widely in other branches of Japanese Buddhism, but they also speak to a fundamental anxiety arising from the premise that salvation rests solely on faith, an anxiety thus innate to Shin itself: How can one be sure one's faith is true? Might not this circumstance help account for both the recurrent appeal of these practices and mainstream Shin's hostility to them? The paradoxical role of the *zenchishiki* as a lay practitioner (not priest) who performs the rite ensuring faith and salvation similarly raises questions regarding the role of the clergy within Shin. I would have liked the book to address such issues more explicitly and earlier, but it provides a good starting point for their further exploration.